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London

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The Black Man's Rights

by

CHARLES RODEN BUXTON



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The Black Man's Rights.

By CHARLES RODEN BUXTON.

THE white man is sweating the black man. I do not mean merely the white man on the spot; I mean the white races—ourselves. That is the broad and terrible fact which stands out from the innumerable ramifications, and the literature, of what is called the "Native Races Question." This question is one of wide range and deep significance. We have a tremendous responsibility, which we cannot evade. And we have a direct interest. The white races may profit for a time, but the exploitation of the black man will lead, sooner or later, to the degradation of the white worker also.

Why We Went To Africa.

We must distinguish two periods in the exploitation of Africa. The first, which we may roughly date as lasting from 1880 to 1900, when most of our tropical African territory was acquired, was a stormy period of conquest, of competition with other Powers for spheres of influence, of the adventurous pushing forward of missionary enterprise, of the prevention of slave-raiding and slave-trading. It was a period in which ample material was afforded for patriotic enthusiasm, for high-minded philanthropy, for appreciating and enjoying the romance of Empire. But the state of the public mind was confused to an extraordinary degree. No one—except the world of Big Business—seems to have analysed the purposes for which all this intense activity was being employed. There was a general current running in the direction of imperialism, not only in this country, but in France and Germany, Belgium and elsewhere. At bottom, the driving force was the need of the white races for tropical products, and the high profits, and rates of interest, which were to be earned in the process of supplying that need. "It was the realisation of this fact" (the need of tropical products) "which led the nations of Europe to compete for

the control of the African tropics," says Sir Frederick Lugard (*The Dual Mandate*). Economists have demonstrated the intimate connection of this process with the rapid accumulation, at home, of capital which could not be profitably invested there, owing to the maldistribution of wealth, and which therefore, demanded an outlet in the undeveloped quarters of the world.

Slavery in a New Form.

The second period is that in which we are now living. It is not a sensational period. Frontiers are settled. Administration is regularised. The exploitation of Africa has settled down, broadly speaking, into a quiet, orderly, effective system. The fruits of the earlier period are now being reaped. Slavery in its simple forms has largely disappeared. But other forms of it are taking their place. The process has become much more subtle than it was. For that very reason its real meaning is the more likely to escape observation. All the greater is the need for vigilance, if injustice on a world scale is to be met, exposed, and prevented.

The Harm Done.

Let us face the question fairly—what is the net result of our actions on the native of Africa? We have robbed him of his land on a colossal scale, and we have established, over large areas, a condition under which he has to sell his labour to the white man on terms which are not dictated by anything approaching to a free contract. Our methods have broken down the old tribal organisation, and irreparably undermined the ideas which supported it. We have, in certain areas, gravely injured family life and caused the spread of devastating diseases. While preventing the native from acquiring European firearms for internal warfare, we have introduced him to the immeasurably greater horrors of the European War, and taught him to fight for one set of white men against another.

The Good Done.

On the other hand, by a great expenditure of blood and money, we have abolished a state of society which caused incalculable human suffering. We have almost completely abolished the slave-trade, with its attendant horrors, and, to

a large extent, the status of slavery also. The incessant raids by the stronger tribes against the weaker, the inter-tribal wars, certain tyrannical governments of a peculiarly bloody character, certain customs productive of degradation and misery—all these have disappeared, or largely disappeared, in consequence of our armed intervention. The native can live in peace, and while we have done virtually nothing for his education, we have, at any rate, established a condition of affairs under which a vast educational development would be possible, if we chose to undertake it. We have introduced Christianity in certain areas, and while there is much controversy as to its net effect upon the native mind, there can be no doubt that (as Dr. Norman Leys shows in his book, *Kenya*) it takes some forms, such as the community life of particular mission stations, which are in line with what is best in native thought and tradition, and at the same time are capable of leading him on to a higher and happier view of life and conduct.

How the Black Man is Sweated.

Summarising our profit and loss account, we may, perhaps, say that its outstanding feature is the substitution of law and order for anarchy; coupled, however, with a most dangerous attempt, on a scale hitherto unknown in the world's history, to fix the tentacles of the capitalist system, produced by European conditions, upon the races of Africa, and to fix them with a rapidity which is both cruel and dangerous.

How is this sweating process carried on? Chiefly by three methods. They are combined in an endless variety of ways and degrees.

(1) **The Land Question.** The native population is deprived of its land. It Kenya it has now no legal right in the land whatever. Bolshevism itself has never carried out a more complete and sweeping confiscation of property. Some land is allotted to the natives in the form of "reserves," but in too small a quantity to provide for (a) food for home consumption; (b) the crops which the natives would, if left to themselves, produce for export; and (c) the needs of the future growth of population. The result is that large numbers of able-bodied men are, and will be increasingly, compelled to go out to work for Europeans. In Kenya, food is

now short in the reserves, and famines at certain times of the year are frequent. Even the reserves are subject to continual encroachment, portions here and there being "alienated" to white settlers, and whole tribes being turned off their ancestral grazing grounds. In Kenya there are probably about 15,000 square miles of land that is fit for the plough. Roughly, about 6,000 square miles of this land are allotted to a black population of 2½ millions, while 9,000 square miles are allotted to a white population of 9,651.

(2) **The Labour Question.** Industrial conscription for Government and railway work is now being put into operation. Quite apart from that, however, the power and influence of Government officials, acting through chiefs who are paid by the Government and are, therefore, under its thumb, is used to apply pressure on the natives in the reserves to come out to work. This is variously described as "encouragement," "inducement," or "advice." If a native is a squatter (the only sort of secure tenure that he can obtain), it is only on condition of a certain number of months' wage-labour. Breach of a labour contract is a criminal offence. The offender is tracked down by the police. Every worker is obliged to carry an identification paper, with a labour record made by the employer. In the allocation of Government help in agriculture, production by the African on his own land is discouraged as compared with production on European plantations or farms. Wages till recently were about 10/- per month. They are now said to have risen to 16/- per month, or 12/- plus food. (In Kenya, a month means 30 working days, i.e., 5 weeks, so this is about 3/- a week).

This is no attack on the white settler. His conduct is dictated by his economic conditions. He is no better and no worse than we should be if we were in his place.

(3) **The Taxation Question.** The African is subjected to direct taxation, for which he cannot procure the necessary cash without wage labour. "A popular theory," says the *Times* correspondent of 9th March, 1925, "is that the native taxation should be increased, the argument being that the more money the native is forced to earn for the State, the longer he will have to work." Every able-bodied male in Kenya has to pay, on the average, 27/- a year. (The highest direct tax paid by the wealthiest white inhabitant is 30/- per

annum). Only a very small proportion of the revenue thus raised from the natives is spent upon the services they require, such as education, doctoring and agriculture.

I must make it clear that these methods are not applied everywhere. In West Africa, for the most part the black man's rights in the land have been maintained. Even in East Africa, native production has been wisely encouraged, of late, in Uganda and Tanganyika; but elsewhere the pressure upon the native to work for the white man has been tremendous. Real economic freedom does not exist. It is restricted, not merely by the general causes which exist wherever capitalism is the order of the day, but also, as has been shown, by the deliberate and organised use of governmental machinery to compel the worker to work.

How to Free the Black Man.

So long as this is the case, the actual wages and conditions are no index whatever of what the black worker would willingly accept, if the bargain between himself and his employer were an approximately free one. Give him a free choice, and then we shall begin to know something about it. As Dr. Norman Leys writes in his remarkable book, *Kenya* :

"When taxation falls lightly on the poor, of whatever race, and heavily on the rich: when every native of Kenya has the enforceable right to as much land as he can use for growing crops both for food and for sale—a right very different from his present supposed right to force himself on some perhaps already overcrowded village, the headman of which regards himself as paid to drive every potential wage-earner out of it; and when the industry of independent African producers is given an organisation comparable to the one which Government has built up in the interests of European producers—then, and then only, will the African wage-earner be a free man. He is not free if the terms of his engagement are fixed by a magistrate, the servant of a Government whose avowed policy is to make him work for others. He will be free only when he can choose between what in his own judgment are the relative advantages of village and plantation life."

"Shortage of Labour."

Meantime, the talk which we so constantly hear about the "shortage of labour" is simply a confusion of the issue. It is quite doubtful whether there is really a sufficiency of labour for the wage-work that is already being demanded—let alone for any further wage-work. The real question is whether the black population ought to be called upon to do this particular work at all. There is always a "shortage of labour"

for certain objects. There is a shortage of labour in England for building pyramids. But the question is: Ought we to build pyramids?

The Evils of Wage-Labour.

The question of Native Production versus Wage Labour is now the subject of keen conflict. Lancashire wants raw cotton, and many business men hold that it can be better produced by the native when working on his own, than when working for the white planter. Some think one thing and some another. What we have to keep in mind is, first, that the black man must be allowed a perfectly free choice; and, secondly, that it is not a question of the mere amount of production. Native production (of cotton, rice, maize, etc.), might be somewhat smaller, but for all that, it might result in a better life for the native population, taking all the facts into account. The real question is, to whom does the advantage of the increased production go? Under the native system it would be more likely to go into the pockets of the producer himself. Under the present system of compulsion in favour of wage-labour, there is much evidence to show that great injury is being inflicted on the native system of society and of industry. The population over large areas appears to be declining. Famines are continually taking place. Tuberculosis and venereal disease have attained appalling dimensions, largely owing to the migration of workers under the wage-labour system.

The Census Report on Nyasaland gives, amongst the reasons for the decline in the indigenous population, "contact with European civilisation." The statistics show a marked excess of females over males in the districts which supply large numbers of male labourers for outside work. It is suggested by the Report that this may be due to mortality amongst the men as a consequence of the sustained work, and other changes of habits, entailed by labour away from home.

"More or Less Underfed."

Another important cause of mortality amongst the natives is starvation. The standard of life of the natives is low, but it is a struggle for them to maintain even that standard. They are obliged to wage a continual struggle against the tsetse fly, which kills their cattle, and the rapidly growing

weeds which choke their plants, and against the excesses of a tropical climate. Many of the natives are habitually undernourished. The danger of famine is certainly much increased by the exactions made from the natives by the white settlers and Government. The Principal Medical Officer of Kenya Colony told the Phelps-Stokes Commission (on Native Education), which recently visited the country, that "nearly every year, for some weeks before the harvest, a large portion of the population is more or less underfed."

The "Lazy" African.

The popular phrase among the settlers is that the native, when at home, is "stagnating." It is the old story about the "lazy" African. Let me make it quite clear that, in my opinion, we have no right whatever to force the black man to be industrious. Nor do I admit that other argument of the exploiter, that it is desirable to "multiply his wants," in order that he may work harder. This is only desirable if, at the same time, we enable him to distinguish between his higher and his lower wants.

What are the considerations which appeal to the black man?

What Does The Black Man Think?

A District Commissioner, giving evidence before the Native Labour Commission (Kenya, 1912-13) on the shortage of labour, stated:—

"Another very great reason was that they appreciated the fact that their labour was worth a certain amount to them, and that they could utilise that labour more to their material comfort by working for themselves with their women in their own homes. When they worked for themselves they could enjoy such leisure as they pleased; they had their own houses and friends, could obtain their customary food, and had their women with them. A further reason was that the Kikuyu, on the whole, did not take very readily to the so-called benefits of civilisation." (p. 211).

The Bishops of Mombasa and Uganda and Mr. J. W. Arthur (of the Church of Scotland Mission), in a Memorandum relating to Native Labour (August, 1920) wrote:—

"The Memorandum (issued by the Governor of Kenya in 1919) apparently assumes that the choice lies between useful work done for the European, and idleness in the reserves. No one who has lived in a native reserve will deny that there are days or months of practical idleness; but no one who has lived in a reserve, and had the opportunity of closely watching native life, but will realise that the native has also his months of strenuous work, cultivating and planting, harvesting, building, etc. The native has also his home, his crops, and his plans

for development. The demands on his time may not be constant, but they are insistent. To leave his own plantation, perhaps at a critical time, for the benefit of some one else's plantation; to leave his house unthatched, his crops unreaped, his wife unguarded perhaps for months at a time, in return for cash which he does not want, on the "advice" of his chief—which he dare not disregard—is not a prospect calculated to inspire loyalty to the Government from whom the advice emanates."

A Conflict of Opinion.

This conflict of opinion as to Native Production versus Wage-Labour is taking shape in Africa as well as in Britain. Among Kenya officials there are many convinced believers in the former policy, which has been slightly less discouraged since 1922.

"We are constantly faced," says the settlers' paper, *East African Standard* (25th October, 1924) "with evidence from the native areas that a number of administrative officials are discouraging the native seeking work outside his reserve, by the obstacles they place in the way of employers who seek to provide an outlet for the services of the African. . . . We are even told that in some quarters active steps are taken to instil into the mind of the native the belief that he is under no obligation to any white man after he has paid his tax, and that he has the opportunity, through increased cultivation in his own reserve, to earn the money and avoid coming out at all."

The "Convention" representing the settlers is seriously concerned about this matter. In a Debate on January 29th, 1925, Lord Delamere said:—

"Many officials were excellent friends to civilisation, but there were a lot who were out of sympathy with their own people. Some of them were at present being put into native areas; they should be put into white areas and come in contact with their own race. Such a contact would teach them the facts of the case. Those young officials who were stationed in the reserves did not understand the native temperament, and they became a menace to civilisation."

A Captain Montague said:—

"The Administration was certainly not playing the game. . . . In this country young University men saturated with democratic and Socialistic ideas were being introduced, and had become a menace to the prestige of the white man."

A Mr. MacLellan Wilson said:—

"Nowadays the service was being recruited from college men in whom was a seething spirit of Socialism, all-men-equal, brotherhood-of-man views, which made them unbalanced and erratic in their actions."

The settlers themselves put their case upon the most lofty grounds. "The Convention believes that extensive cultivation is detrimental to the moral welfare of the natives." (*Manchester Guardian*, November 12th, 1924). We seem to have heard this kind of argument before.

A Code of Native Rights.

The true policy is to devise a general Code of Native Rights. Such a Code was demanded by the Pan-African Congress in 1920—the first organised attempt to place the black man's point of view, as such, before the public opinion of the world. In the elaboration of this Code of Native Rights, the British Empire ought to play a leading part. While we must beware of national self-righteousness, the besetting sin of the Englishman, it would be equally wrong to ignore the fact that our fellow-countrymen, when all the pros and cons have been weighed up, have a better record than other people who have attempted the government of native races. Our experience, taken as a whole, has been longer, and it has been very much more varied. Moreover, ever since the middle of the 18th Century, we have had a section of public opinion at home which has resolutely refused to allow the government of native races to be determined by the "man on the spot." The "Pro-Consul" (much to his disgust) has never been allowed an entirely free hand for many years together. "Exeter Hall," that bugbear of the Empire-builder and the commercial exploiter, has never been entirely silent.

"A Sacred Trust of Civilisation."

In these later years, a new factor has come into play which may profoundly influence the attitude of the white man towards the black. This is the League of Nations. The policy of "Mandates" has not yet accomplished very much, but it has behind it an idea which is fruitful, and fundamentally just. It has, further, created a piece of machinery which, if rightly used, will have the effect of pooling the experiences of the nations chiefly concerned with the government of native races, and of throwing the light of publicity upon the methods by which that government is carried on. Among other things, the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations—or perhaps better still, the International Labour Office—is capable of being used to work out the Code of Rights to which I have referred, and to secure the adoption of its principles, not only in the territories already "mandated," but in all the territories where their application is needed. One has only to read the terms of Article 22 of the

League of Nations Covenant to realise that there is no reason in the world why such terms should apply to ex-German or ex-Turkish territories, more than to any others. It is there laid down that in the case of "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation."

"A sacred trust of civilisation"—do we mean it? If so, we must bestir ourselves. There is need of unceasing vigilance if the white races are not to be simply exploiters of the black—if we, the people of Great Britain, and above all, the Socialists of Great Britain, are to vindicate the black man's rights.

List of Books.

L. S. WOOLF. "Empire and Commerce in Africa."
E. D. MOREL. "The Black Man's Burden."
SIR FREDERICK LUGARD. "The Dual Mandate."
LORD CLIVIER. "White Capital and Coloured Labour."
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Report of the East Africa Commission, 1925.

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